MONATLICHER INFORMATIONSBRIEF ÜBER EVANGELISATION

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

Number 9
December 1956

Emilio Castro is a young Methodist minister from Bolivia, who here writes from his own experience as an evangelist there. The particular point of his letter concerns

THE PRESSURES ON THE EVANGELIST WORKING IN AN AREA OF RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE

This letter is about Bolivia. Our country has an indigenous population of approximately 80%, a mass that has been living generally on inhuman levels economically as well as socially and culturally. Four hundred years of this life have contributed to create an atmosphere clear of social distinctions and of resentments between the levels of society. Hardly four years ago a bloody revolution of the people brought to power a political party that actuated rapid measures which tended to break down the social organization that had been maintained since the Colonial Period. It distributed arms to the Indians and disarmed the army, divided the land among the Indians and in every way has tried to make them feel that they are the real masters of the situation.

Consequently everything is now in a state of insecurity and uneasiness. The social situation complicated in itself is augmented in its seriousness by a severe inflationary process that increases the resentment of the middle class. The Indian who has won his liberty does not yet know how to utilize that freedom with a sense of responsibility and as a result the production of consumer goods has descended enormously, while with his gun on his shoulder the Indian likes to exhibit his new power.

In the midst of this tense situation the churches continue their work of evangelization. Logically I limit my remarks to the work of the evangelical churches and in particular to my personal work, as we cannot speak of evangelization work on the part of the Catholic Church.

In the first place this social revolution has brought positive results for the preaching of the Gospel. The Indian now wishes to learn. The educational work of the evangelical churches is being demanded in all corners of the Bolivian countryside. And logically with its educational

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work is openly united the work of evangelization. Likewise the fact of having his own land and weapons has given a greater feeling of personal independence to the Indian, an independence which he uses to listen to the preaching of the Gospel without fear of the traditional taboos of the religion to which he nominally belonged. In this sense it is the hour of opportunity for Protestantism among the indigenous Bolivian masses and all the denominations in general are making rapid progress in this land.

This same rapid growth presents all the problems imaginable in the life of the churches. How to fully educate these masses in Protestantism. How to obtain the number of leaders needed. How to avoid in the enthusiasm the rise of personal divisions. These are the problems that challenge us at present in our indigenous work and in whose solution lies the future of the Church in Bolivia.

But this total upheaval of the social life of Bolivia presents problems to whomever wishes to make of evangelization a Christian work of effective penetration in the life and problems of the society. If the racial limits are not exact, the social limits are; and thus we see that churches are arising which consciously or unconsciously specialize in service to a particular sector of the community. The particular church that we have the honour of leading can be catalogued as a middle class congregation with some university elements in it. They are the socially "white". And up to now all our evangelistic efforts have not succeeded in integrating the congregation with elements of the other social groups except on a small scale. We have presented the problem seriously to the congregation. We understand it as our Christian responsibility. But until now we have been powerless. Some members openly postulate the theory of evangelistic specialization in one stratum of society as the only strategy possible in the present social situation. Neither the Indian nor the "cholo" (mestizo) feels comfortable with the whites and will not easily accept our invitation to a church of "whites", while the reverse is perhaps even stronger; the white declines all invitation to meetings of evangelization in which the Indian participates.

In short, the problem that as yet we have not solved with a tranquil conscience is the following: Must we specialize in evangelizing elements of the middle class, university students, etc., and neglect for the moment the other social classes in the hope that once the first are christianized they can serve the rest? Or must we attempt, at the risk of limiting in numerical possibilities the success of the evangelization, an equal emphasis on all social levels? Until now the only solution of compromise encountered has been to build up congregations in the Spanish language and in the indigenous languages, but aside from the idiomatic difference is found every social, economic and even political difference. Our serious problem now is how to bring together these congregations so that they may not be a mere reflection of the problems of the society but constructive elements for a better national future.

In our congregation this situation of constant social change has another immediate consequence. The loss of their position of prestige in their social life, the economic difficulties, especially the inflation that dominates us, leads all the members of this class to consider leaving the country in search of better economic opportunities. For the members of these superior classes of society Bolivia seems a country submerged and for which there is no other solution than to escape across the border and to save themselves individually. As a result, while the strictly indigenous churches live in an atmosphere of rapid growth, the few middle class churches find themselves confronted with a serious problem of loss of leadership and an almost constant turnover of their membership. For example, in our congregation in the present year we have received twenty-four new members but at the same time we are transferring eighteen to foreign countries. Our evangelism is then conditioned by the merits and limitations of a congregation of Christians with only two years of Christian experience - the merit of first devotion, and the limits of a mixture of every kind of personal ideas and personal prejudices in the evangelizing testimony of laymen.

Logically a situation of rapid change in which almost all the population have firearms in their homes and in which the demonstration of newly acquired power is an enormous pleasure for the Indian constitutes a situation of general insecurity that has other repercussions for the work of evangelization. Last year a group of fourteen denominations unitedly planned and began a series of evangelistic meetings in a theater in the capital. Hardly had two nights of successful meetings taken place when the threat of acts of violence appeared, which obliged the proprietor of the theater to request a breaking of the contract for fear that his installations would be completely destroyed. Neither the police nor the public had the ability to prevent any disaster that might occur. Moreover the same police suggested that we meet in our own churches because they could in no way control any attempt at physical aggression that might develop against our meetings, in spite of all the laws that guarantee us the right to this kind of meeting. Many years will pass before any effort at mass evangelization can be repeated in the city of La Paz in virtue of this precedent.

This same situation causes insecurity on the streets at night which obliges us to consider seriously what is the best hour for evangelistic activities. In general in Bolivia we have agreed that the ideal hour to obtain the attendance of new persons is early in the evening. But to go out at night now is dangerous. Rifle shots sound through the air; groups of people who seem out to enjoy themselves frighten others. Thus, people especially who live in detached sections of town are not much interested in leaving their homes. It is possible to expect that those who are already Christian may decide to brave the dangers of the night in order to attend the service, but it would be too much to expect that those who are not yet Christian do the same. At first glance it seems an easy problem to change the hour but a change in schedule implies also a reduction in evangelistic possibilities because of the social customs of the people, other activities that compete, etc.

Evangelization among the university students requires a special section. Our congregation is situated only about two blocks from the University and in virtue of its social composition it seems to us that the University is a field of evangelization especially appropriate for us. The agitated political life has not respected the university "cloister". All the political parties work there actively and it can be said without exaggeration that eighty per cent of the students are under the influence of Marxist ideas. That does not mean Communist in the sense of active militants in a party with that tendency and with international connections but Marxists constituting different tendencies in the national scenery. Unfortunately, they have no spiritual orientation to make them see the relevance of Christianity to their personal, student or national problems. Like the immense majority of Latin American students, they are prejudiced enormously against the churches, which makes direct evangelization work difficult among them. In this situation we have found an effective aid in the evangelizing work of the SCM. Of course, in the centre of this group a confessional evangelization limited to one denomination is not attempted, but the frank discussion of their problems utilizing their language, yet through their language mediating the Christian message, has already produced fruit in the congregation without the necessity of consciously seeking it. In this group they continually discover the need for the Church for their Christian lives. Logically this demands more time, energy and preparation, but it is worthwhile to attempt this extra-ecclesiastical work in order to win the Latin American intelligentzia for Protestantism.

There are many difficulties, also much trouble, but one after another is being converted in opportunities of witness, of service and in the final analysis of evangelization. Day after day our prayer has been raised asking divine guidance in the new complexities of the situation, and day by day we must live seeking divine pardon, understanding our human inability to cross the boundaries of socio-racial prejudices. But day by day also we must be grateful that we already see progress, for the miracles of changed lives that we observed and which in the final analysis constitute the only guarantee of a better tomorrow for this beloved land.